Cultural, Contextual and Religious Issues in Terrorist Motivation

Thomas F. Ditzler, Ph.D. MA, FRIPH

Director of Research,
Department of Psychiatry, Tripler Army Medical Center

Training Advisor,
Center of Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance

Terrorism: DoD Definition

"The calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious or ideological"

Understanding the Psychology of Terrorism

- The biggest stumbling block for getting into a terrorist's head is getting out of our own.

- Two important questions:
  - What's the motivation ?
  - Who's the audience ?

Aren't They Just Crazy?

- It's easy to think of terrorists as simply psychopathic killers who use political, social or cultural issues as a pretext for acting out their lunacy

- In fact, very few terrorists are mentally ill in any diagnosable sense.

Who, Exactly, Is a Terrorist ?

- Yasser Arafat
- Frederick de Klerk
- Menachem Begin
- Henry Kissinger
- Le Duc Tho
- Mohamed A. al-Sadat
- Nelson Mandella

Why The Violence?

Cost Effective
Low Risk
Gain Attention
Express Frustration

> 90% of all terrorist attacks
are at least partially successful

Common Terrorist Goals

- Disrupt the bond of faith between the state and the individual
- Demonstrate the weakness or vulnerability of the state or declared opposition
- New goal of international terrorism: Generate a multi-sectoral impact

Common Terrorist Goals (Cont)

- Create climate of fear
- Inspire emulation
- Militarize a political situation
- Provocation
- Provoke civil war or revolution
- Recognition
- Intimidation
- Coercion
- Insurgency Support
- Polarize the community

Common Terrorist Messages

- Offended by the perceived dilution of moral values, lack of political access, economic opportunity, etc.
- See themselves as agents of change.
- They are outside the laws, customs and protections of society
- View victims as insignificant

Target Selection Criteria

- Accessibility; vulnerability; value; publicity
- Most acts are symbolic, hence more likely to involve bombings or facilities attacks
- Terrorist group politics & priorities
  - Gov. leaders or community at large?
- Operational needs
  - Publicity, weapons, materiel, money

Terrorist Motivation

- Three general types of terrorist motivation:
  - Rational
  - Psychological
  - Cultural

(Hoffman, RAND Corp.; US Army Field Manual ***Stability & Support Operations***, Ch.8, "Combatting Terrorism")

Mind of the Rationally Motivated Terrorist

- Motivation derives from potential utility of action
- Essential question: “will terrorism work for the desired purpose, given the conditions at the time?”
- Thinks through goals & options

Mind of the Rationally Motivated Terrorist

- Considers the cost / benefit ratio; operates like a senior business executive or military officer
- Often has a clear constituency
- Bottom line : “will this work?”

Mind of the Psychologically Motivated Terrorist

- Motivation derives from dissatisfaction with life.
- Essential question : How can I use terrorism to maintain my identity and self esteem?”
- In group-out group world view; very intense group dynamics

Mind of the Psychologically Motivated Terrorist

- Group acceptance stronger than stated objectives; success equals failure
- No dissent, no ambiguity; no compromise; maximalist positions; negotiation considered dishonorable if not treasonous
- Bottom line : “I need this”

Mind of the Culturally Motivated Terrorist

- Motivation derives from the fear of cultural extermination
- Essential question is “how can I stop the threat to my culture / ethnicity / religion / group /clan / tribe / political party ?”
- Major predictor of terrorism is the perception of “outsiders”

Mind of the Culturally Motivated Terrorist

- Relative tolerance for political and non-political violence is a factor in determining the relative acceptability of terrorism
- Most volatile cultural identifier is religion. Values are deeply held; threat encompasses present, past and future
- Bottom line; “whatever is required”

Terrorist Psyche
(Jerrold Post)

- The most intractable terrorists are those who are “bred to hate” from generation to generation as in some forms of racial, ethnic or religious hatred. Animosity is passed from parent to child and is, in effect, “in the blood”.

Terrorist Psyche
(Jerrold Post)

- Religious terrorists are the most dangerous. A social or political (secular) terrorist usually has a defined mission in measurable terms like media attention or government attention. The religious terrorist looks only to the Supreme Being for judgement or approval and can therefore justify the most heinous act.

Three Themes of Religious Terrorism

- Conducted as a Sacramental Act
- Carried out with Moral Certainty
- Approved by Divine Sanction

Context of Operations

- Nationalists / Secessionists
  - Carry on the mission of their fathers
  - Establish or re-establish homeland
    - PLO, Provisional IRA, ETA
- Anarchists / Zealots
  - Destroy the world of their fathers
  - Carry out acts against those loyal to the current regime
    - Bolsheviks (ca. 1917)

Justifying the Violence

- Forced to turn to violence:
  - Ends justify the means
  - No alternatives for correcting injustices
  - Cannot accept the world as it is
  - Some evil must be tolerated for greater good
  - Promise of things to come

Why Americans?

- The U.S. supports regimes that experience significant internal strife. This will insure our appearance as targets.
- We have:
  - Worldwide Presence (political-military)
  - Symbolic Value (cultural hegemony)
  - High Visibility (media / physical presence)
  - Poor Security Practices (open society)
  - Negative Attitude (as perceived by others)

Responses to Terrorism

- Current Weaknesses:
  - Poor Human intelligence
  - Lack of unity among responders
  - Extradition problems
  - Light sentences
  - Prisoner exchanges

Responses to Terrorism *cont.*

- Current Strengths:
  - Pressures against state sponsors
  - Increased intelligence sharing
  - Refusal to negotiate
  - Trial as criminals
  - More unified approach
  - Multisectoral international effort

How Terrorism Ends
(Jacob & Schlaghek)

- Terrorist violence is viewed as illegitimate by the group's public or audience.
- Other legitimate vehicles for political expression or satisfaction of demands exist within the political system.
- Use of terrorist violence succeeds in forcing concessions by the State, or in defeating the state.

How Terrorism Ends *cont.*
(Jacob & Schlaghek)

- The State response is effective in over-whelming the terrorist movement due to the efficiency of repression by the State's agents, or the use of high technology against it.
- Movement is driven by internal dissent or leadership struggles which may turn in part on the wisdom of the use of violence.

How Terrorism Ends *cont.*
(Jacob & Schlaghek)

- The government proves adroit at combining the repression of the terrorist violence with accommodative policies aimed at undercutting support for the terrorist camp by political moderates and the public.

- Terrorist group loses the support of a crucial foreign sponsor.

How Terrorism Ends *cont.*
(Jacob & Schlaghek)

- External states or international organizations use their good offices to broker peace settlements and an end to conflict.
- A mutual face-saving solution is sought by two or more adversaries who come to value peace more than they do the continuation of warfare.

Questions & Comments ?